

Ursuline Academy, Chapel  
300 Augusta Street  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

HABS No. TX-32-C

HABS  
TEX  
15-SANT,  
7C-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

URSULINE ACADEMY, CHAPEL

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Location: 300 Augusta Street, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.

Present Owner: San Antonio Conservation Society, San Antonio, Texas.

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Significance: This building forms a significant part of the Ursuline Academy buildings and is one of the more stylistically noteworthy of the group. Erected at about the same period (1866-1870) as the Dormitory building which adjoins it on the north, the Chapel is an example of local stone construction in the Gothic Revival style.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1868-70.
2. Architect: Although it has yet to be documented, it has been locally believed for many years that the architect was Francis Giraud, Jr., and it seems probable that this is true.
3. Original and subsequent owners: See History section of the Ursuline Academy, HABS No. TX-32.
4. Builder: The Reverend E.M. Buffard, a Chaplain of the Ursuline Academy, is said to have directed the construction of both the chapel and the dormitory and assisted "with his own hands."

- B. Historical Context: The original location of the chapel was in the Academy Building. One of the large rooms in that building was set aside for the use of a chapel.

As the community grew there was an increasing shortage of space until after the Civil War when the Sisters undertook the erection of the dormitory and the chapel building. These two structures were begun at about the same time: the dormitory cornerstone was laid September 14, 1866, the fifteenth anniversary of the Sisters' arrival in San Antonio; and the cornerstone of the chapel was blessed and laid by Bishop C.M. Dubuis on January 10 or 20, 1868. The cost for the construction of the chapel and the dormitory was \$50,000.

See also History section of the Ursuline Academy, HABS No. TX-32.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Gothic Revival chapel has a cruciform floor plan, a common feature of Catholic church architecture.
2. Condition of fabric: The present condition of the building is good, but it is in need of numerous repairs.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The L-shaped chapel measures approximately 64 feet east-west and 95 feet north-south. Naves and chancel are the height of two stories. The west nave is two bays and the north nave is three bays plus narrow balcony.
2. Foundation: Rubble limestone from local quarry, set in lime mortar. It projects from grade a few inches on west facade to approximately 18 inches on the south facade. It also projects from wall construction on "east-south" and south facades to form a socle to carry the line of the first Academy building socle to the southwest corner where it ends.
3. Walls: Soft yellowish limestone with stonework varying from crude coursed rubble on west facade to rubble at other locations. Stone buttresses are at the corners and between bays. The stonework is best in the buttresses, and is smoothest there and in the window and door frames.
4. Structural system and framing: The masonry walls are loadbearing. The north nave is spanned by scissors trusses in timber, which support wood purlins and board decking. This portion was visible through a hatch in the attic of the north wall. The framing over the west nave was not visible; but the difference in slope between the ceiling and the roof there suggests scissors trusses again. Over the chancel a large descending pyramidal form in the ceiling indicates that some inverted umbrella-like construction was used there to perform the function of a truss. Two similar constructions are to be seen in the attic of the building adjoining the chapel to the east.
5. Porches: A two-story gallery extends across the south and east facades of the south transept and adjoins the south gallery of the first Academy building. Similarly a short gallery extends across the east facade of the north transept.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The principal doorway is located at the center of the west wall of the nave of the chapel. This is spanned by two lancet arches, the upper one flush with the outside face of masonry, the lower one is set back in a

slight reveal. Both have dressed limestone voussoirs set in lime mortar. A pedimental molding of two-stone fillets projects from the wall above the arches. The tympanum is filled by stained glass; doors are wood, modern. In addition, there are four doorways in the south transept or Oratory.

- b. Windows and shutters: There are two lancet windows in the west nave facade at a second story height centered between the two buttresses and the north and south corners, respectively. These have a plain stone architrave with a slight reveal, rectangular in section. The arch is formed by only two "voussoirs." The opening is filled with stained glass.

Other window openings, with the exception of those of the Oratory, are spanned by large lancet arches subdivided into two lancet arches. The architraves are of dressed limestone, plain without moldings, and project from the wall slightly.

The window openings of the Oratory are spanned by ashlar limestone lintels over which is superimposed a simple relieving arch of two rectangular stone members. The jambs are formed ashlar limestone.

Windows are three lights inward-opening, wood-sash casement. Three of these windows are on the upper and lower south facade, respectively, and one is on the upper and lower east facade, respectively, near the corner.

All of the Oratory windows have adjustable louvered, double-wood shutters with three panels.

## 7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof shape is composite, in general being a double slope with ridge type, but gabled at the west end, hipped at the south facade of the Oratory and joining at the north end with the north building.

Presently the roof is covered with a standing-seam metal roof. Over the north transept and central nave it appears that the roof was always metal, for there is only solid wood sheathing over the rafters rather than shingle stripping. However, the roof over the Oratory was originally shingled, for the shingles and the rough slab stripping may be observed from the attic.

- b. Cornice, eaves: There is no roof overhang, consequently no eaves. There is a molded stone cornice that projects several inches from the wall.

- c. Dormers: Two small ventilating dormers are on the south hip, and their sides have wood louvered front. Two additional dormers existed on the east and west slopes, respectively, but these have been removed.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The plan follows the characteristic cruciform type, having a central nave oriented east to west and chancel with a shallow Oratory but differs somewhat in that the north transept is larger than the central nave. There is a shallow upper gallery across the north wall of the north transept.
2. Stairways: None.
3. Flooring: Softwood boards with some linoleum of most common type.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are plastered and painted.

The ceiling in the nave is pitched, corresponding to the roof above; its western part is framed with deeper members. In the north transept an attempt was made to imitate vaulted ceilings. Over the chancel, an inverted "umbrella vault" appears as a descending pyramid. The king post projects down at the center and is finished as an elaborate boss in the Gothic style. This construction is purely decorative and serves no structural function.

Ceilings in all of the above described areas were installed circa 1900 and are of wood, tongue-and-groove, beaded ceiling boards.

The Oratory ceilings are 1" x 6" plain boards, originally painted blue, now white or light cream. Upper ceiling finished with molded cove is painted dark cream.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Two doorways are located on the east wall of the chancel. This wall is actually the old west wall of the first Academy building, and the openings are apparently the original exterior openings to that structure. The doors are later, circa 1900.

Two additional doorways on the lower floor are located on the north wall of the north transept and lead into the old north dormitory building, which adjoins at that point.

There is yet one more doorway in the center of the later frame partition on the second floor of the Oratory. The door is a four-panel type, wood with a ventilating transom above.

6. Decorative features and trim: The altar, chancel rails, and balcony rails are hand-carved softwood utilizing Gothic trefoil arch motives; however the motives vary with the particular location, suggesting that they were executed by different people at different times.
7. Hardware: Typical for the time.
8. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: Modern gas space heater.
  - b. Lighting: Modern electric fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The chapel nave is oriented east to west and transepts, north to south. The building forms an integral part of the old Ursuline complex and is the principal "facade" for the group. The neighborhood land use is commercial, with a three-story parking structure across Augusta Street for a Sears Roebuck department store. The San Antonio River is at the south boundary of the property, and the central business district of the city is a few blocks further south. Extensive suburban developments of the city make central growth slow.
2. Landscaping: The street entrance has a iron-fenced garden with lawn and a few trees and stone paving. The east side of the nave adjoins an enclosed patio and the south transept leads to the south garden.

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Survey  
December 1968  
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Summer 1968

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, Chief of HABS, the project was carried out by Wesley I. Shank (Iowa State University), project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Bellinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermsen (Iowa State University) at the HABS field office in the former Ursuline Academy buildings,

San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., Director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress. Dewey G. Mears of Austin, Texas took the documentary photographs of the San Antonio structures.